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RA 322282

(832)
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Working papers

THE WOMEN'S GROUP PROGRAMME IN MEERE

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WORKING PAPER NO. 233

INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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August 1975



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IDS



095309

IDS/WT 233

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This is the third in a series of case studies on the Women's Group Programme in the six Special Rural Development Programme (S.R.D.P.) areas of Kenya, prepared in conjunction with the 1975 I.D.S. Evaluation of the S.R.D.P. The entire report on the Women's Programme, including the initial overview section, is presented in the form of IDS Working Papers Nos. 230 - 236.

THE WOMEN'S GROUP PROGRAMME IN MBERETHE LEADERSSocial Background

What sort of people are Women's Group leaders? Data are given here for those who attended the course in September 1973 (total of 14 leaders).¹ Interviews were carried out with these leaders at Kangaru C.D.T.C., Embu, at the time the course was being held.

The age range was from 18 to 57, average about 28. Seven claimed to be chairmen of their groups, 3 to be secretaries, 2 treasurers and 2 ordinary members. It was noted that, contrary to policy, quite a few younger women held the post of chairman - the official idea has been that this should be reserved for one of the older women in the group. All of them described their occupation as "farming". One said she also worked in a self-employed capacity as a "tailor" and one had previously worked as a nursery teacher. For the remaining twelve women, "farming" had been their only occupational experience. Four were unmarried. Of the remainder, three were married to P2 teachers, two to clerks, two to drivers, one to a hospital dresser, one to a retired hotel worker and one to a retired clerk. No leader, in other words, was married to a husband who was (or had been) entirely dependent on farming as a source of income. This is fairly typical of the Mbere situation generally. Only one said she had no education. Of the remaining thirteen, five had gone as far as standard seven. Details are given in the table below:-

Table 1. Education of leaders

Nil	adult studies	Std I -IV	Std V	Std VI	Std VII
1	2	-	3	3	5

This means that these leaders are probably of generally higher education than Mbere women in general.

1. More than 14 leaders attended the course, but the additional ones were from non-SRDP areas of Embu district.

Only one of the fourteen said she had never read (or had read to her) a newspaper or magazine of some kind. This was the women without any education at all. The most often cited newspaper was "Taifa Leo" (six times), followed by "Kenya Yetu" and "Daily Nation" (five times each). All but one of the women listen to the radio at least "sometimes." Only one is a "regular" viewer of T.V. The mobile cinema had not reached all the leaders; nine of them claimed "never" to have seen it in their area.

As far as land is concerned, data on Mbere present difficulties in that most of the area has not been adjudicated. However, the women were asked how much land they had access to, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Leaders' access to land

Land acreage	0 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 15	16 +	D.K
No. of women	8	3	1	1	1

There is no reason to believe that this pattern implies that the women leaders have access to more land than other women in Mbere. The higher acreage women are from the drier part of Mbere (in the south-east) where 15 acres might be equivalent to, say, 5 acres in a location like Mbeti near Embu town.

Training

The kind of training which the leaders have been given has been designed to cover a broad range of activities. The course held in May, 1974, is given here as an example. Lesson summaries prepared by the individual trainers show that the topics covered included Agriculture (Katumani Maize, Cotton, Mexican 142 Pea/Beans), handicrafts (sewing, mending, cutting patterns, basketry), animal husbandry (AI and calf - rearing, goat keeping), poultry keeping, pottery making, cooperatives, fund raising, nutrition, child care, group organisation and family money budgeting. In a two - week period, around 35 lessons were given. The problem is that it might be a mistake to try to do so much in so short a time. There must be a limit to what the leaders can absorb in such a short time. An improvement would be a reduction in the number of topics to give the teaching a more concentrated focus. Which topics to include involves, of course, a difficult choice - but thorough enquiry into the social and economic needs of women in the area might give a reasonably precise answer.

There has been little opportunity to "sit in" classes. However, one class which we were able to attend perhaps serves as an example. The method was the lecture followed by a question and answer session (this seems fairly typical). It was noticeable that the older women were far more active participants than the younger ones. The lecturer (the divisional CDA) explained to the women the kinds of "harambee" activities they might involve themselves in as groups. She listed the following (in no particular order of priority):-

1. Collective farming and livestock-keeping
2. Fund raising
3. Building better houses (e.g. with "mabati" roofing)
4. Water projects
5. Housekeeping (giving advice on)
6. Construction of cattle dips
7. " Dispensaries
8. " Churches
9. " Improved roads.

Also, it was explained to the leaders how an executive committee should operate (procedures, elections etc). Stress was placed on the need to adequately involve men in such activities so they do not become alienated.

At the start of the Programme, a major problem in Mbere was the "drop-out" of leaders. Of the 25 leaders who attended the 1971 training, only 5 were still available for the second phase in 1973. Many of the leaders selected in 1971 seem not to have been leaders in any meaningful sense and were not able to subsequently form a group. The main error seems to have been that in the selection process too much emphasis was placed on the younger, educated women whilst elder women who may have been more genuine leaders were left out. Also, follow-up appears to have been poor.

This mistake was recognised in 1973 when fresh selections were made. Although many were young and some did not have any groups before training, there is some indication that their post-training activities were of more significance than previously. Undoubtedly, a greater degree of group and leader continuity has been maintained. A PBFL report (No. 15, 1974) indicates 100% continuity in this training series. This is an impressive improvement, even if it is recognised that some of the

leaders involved are from non-SRDP areas (where greater continuity is to be expected). Significant contributory factors may well be not just the selection, but also the training and the follow-up of the groups.

Perception of the Programme.

Few of the women have very much idea about SRDP - only about half of them had heard of it. As far as their training is concerned, they tend to be unanimously uncritical. They are, not surprisingly, more critical of the help they get in the field from the Government. For instance, they complain that although they are taught to sew they do not have the equipment for this kind of work back in their home areas. Marketing of handicrafts is another serious problem (i.e. the women can produce handicrafts but then lack market outlets for what they produce). The problem is compounded by the fact that one of the most obvious agencies for marketing, "Maendeleo ya Wanawake", is a discredited organisation in Mbere. The women complained that they paid their subscriptions as long ago as 1970 but still had not been accepted as members. They therefore derived no benefit from the organisation. The consequence is a feeling of bitterness which militates against further involvement of "Maendeleo ya Wanawake" in women's activities in Mbere.² Another complaint which some women make about the Programme is that there has been hostility towards it from some chiefs and assistant-chiefs. For instance, some groups were prevented from holding meetings because their activities were considered politically "suspect". By 1975, however, improved understanding seems to have reduced this problem greatly.

THE GROUPS

The ecological condition of Mbere imposes definite constraints upon women's activities in the area. The major factor is water. Diana Hunt has noted that during the "dry season" (which can amount to 9 months of the year) women in Mbere may spend up to 9 or 10 hours per day going to look for water and then having to queue for it (IDS Working Paper No. 166, p. 67). Occasionally, absence of water makes it impossible to cook. She notes that the provision of a reliable water supply could make a "major impact on rural welfare and economic activity

2. All the officials of the district "Maendeleo ya Wanawake" Committee are from Embu division.

in Mbere" (Hunt, p. 67). Certainly, this point is valid for the Women's Programme. After two years of working in Mbere, the situation was aptly summed up by one Health Assistant: "The people of Mbere always say 'Give us water, then we will consider your other ideas'."

Membership

It is difficult to obtain precise data on this matter. Official (both PBFL and DSS) reports tell us that there were roughly 12 women's groups in Mbere in 1970. By 1974, according to the CDO's report, there were 25 groups and a total of 950 women were members of them. There seems little reason to doubt that the Programme has contributed to the increase in the number of groups in Mbere. If the CDO's figures are correct this means, using the 1969 population census, that about 18% of all adult women in Mbere are involved in some form of women's group. It should be noted that the membership and, indeed, the existence of these groups is very erratic. There has been a tendency, throughout the Programme, for groups to rise, fall and rise again with a rapidity too great for the reporting and statistical system to handle. Often the CDAs (the principal sources of data) have not been aware of which groups in their area had collapsed, nor which had just sprung up.

The problem is demonstrated when we compare, location by location, the 1972 with the 1974 position. In 1972, for 22 groups about which we have information, the locational distribution was as follows:-

Table 3. Distribution of groups by location (1972)

Location	Mbeti	Mavuria	Evurone	Nthawa
% of groups in SRDP	9%	13%	48%	30%

However, by 1974 - for 21 groups - the distribution between locations had altered greatly:-

Table 4. Distribution of groups by location (1974)

Location	Mbeti	Mavuria	Evurone	Nthawa
% of groups in SRDP	19%	33%	29%	19%

This means that in a two year period, Mbeti location went up from 9% to 19%, Mavuria up from 13% to 33%, Evurone down from 48% to 29% and Nthawa down from 30% to 19%. There is no straightforward explanation for these changes. However, the rapid advance of Mavuria may be explained by the activities of the CDA who was posted there in 1973. Incidentally, an indication of the Programme's impact is the way in which Mbeti lags behind. This location is more densely populated and more productive than the others and thus has a better basis for a successful Women's Programme. However, the policy in SRDP has been to concentrate on the other three less well placed locations. The data we have seem to indicate that this strategy has paid off.

Activities and Plans

For group activities, the 1974 position will be discussed. It is apparent that many of the groups have shown a real advance since the start of the Programme. The two main activities seem to be shamba-work (including bush-clearing) and the construction of day care centres. A particularly impressive example of the first kind of activity was found in Mavuria location where one group had accumulated (as of mid-1974) 5,000 shillings in a bank account. This group has about 30 members. A number of women's groups are also involved in projects to construct day care centres. In this kind of activity they do not operate independently of the men who are also involved. Added impetus for this sort of activity comes from the growing realisation that, under Mbere conditions, education may provide the only possible route to economic advancement. At the same time, Mbere's low level of economic development tends to work against success. Day Care Centres are "fund-raising" rather than "labour contribution" projects and money is not easily raised in Mbere, especially in times of drought. Nor is there any guarantee that, once completed, the centres can be well run. For instance, many parents' committees in Mbere find the utmost difficulty in raising the money to pay the teacher a regular wage of about 50/- per month.

Table 5 gives an indication of the main activities of the women's groups in Mbere:-

Table 5. Activities of women's groups in Mbere

	<u>No. of groups</u>
1. Shamba work	17
2. Nursery schools	9
3. Sewing	5
4. Basket making	3
5. Cookery	2
6. Other buildings (e.g. Health Centre)	2
7. Katumani maize trial plot	2
8. Sunflower trial plot	2
9. Functional literacy	2

Although no groups are reported to be involved in keeping livestock, steps are currently being taken to start this. It is noticeable that few groups are involved in handicraft production. We have already referred to the problems of marketing and the fact that "Maendeleo ya Wanawake" is not likely to provide a solution. Diana Hunt (to whose work we have already referred) argues that handicraft production is one kind of economic activity likely to do well in Mbere. A possible solution to the marketing problem might be to capitalise on the fact that Embu town is now well placed on the tourist circuit. Visitors to Meru Mulika Lodge stay overnight at the Izaak Walton Inn. The Mbere women may thus be able to use this as a market in the same way as, for example, women in Kericho district at one time did by selling their goods at the Kericho Tea Hotel.

Mbere at the moment seems to have struck a reasonable balance between social and economic development projects. As such, the women's groups are performing in the way suggested in the current Development Plan (see p. 489). The task ahead is to see that this balance is preserved and one way in which this can be done is by taking steps to improve the prospects for handicraft production. This balance is likely to be difficult to maintain in Mbere where the dry conditions in the area give rise to a situation in which it is difficult for many women to commit themselves to activities which involve giving up a large amount of labour-time. Many farms in Mbere have insufficient labour to be run fully; it is therefore not surprising that women are reluctant to give much time for "extra-farm" activities.

It is also desirable to ensure that men do not feel alienated from, or distrustful of, women's groups. One anthropologist who worked in Mbere for over a year has noted the emphasis on male superiority in the Mbere value system. There is a proverb: "what is said by men is not opposed by women." He also says that men consider women to be "wholly bereft of councillor skills such as argumentation, negotiation and knowledge of customary law."³ Because we did find cases of women saying that one difficulty they had was that their activities were opposed by men it is recommended that such factors as these be taken into account in future planning.

It is also worth looking into ways in which at least partial solutions to the water problem can be incorporated into the Programme. This seems a particularly pressing need in Mbere where lack of water imposes such a severe constraint on the use of women's time.

THE OFFICIALS

At the early stages of the Programme considerable problems of coordination were encountered. In mid-1973 a PBFL report on Mbere commented:

"Even though group activities include nutrition and child care, education and learning of simple agricultural skills which include the specialities of many departments, home economics and CD staff alone work regularly with groups and complain they lack the time and personnel and teaching equipment to give needed guidance and teaching to groups. Even past possessiveness over groups resulting from a reporting system which encourages workers to "own" groups was cited as preventing CD and home economics staff from working together."

The PBFL report goes on to note that senior health and agricultural personnel have not really seen the usefulness of the Programme. Joint planning combined with a general recognition of the importance of the Programme as one to be shared between departments seems to have improved matters. In training, at least, there seems to be good cooperation between departments. Prior to the dismissal of locational CDAs in October 1974, 'follow up' was largely a DSS affair. This loss of staff, however, necessitates full involvement of other departments. The signs are that this will be forthcoming, especially from the Health Assistants.

3. J. Glazier, Conflict and Conciliation among the Mbere of Kenya, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, 1972, p. 57.

However, steps need to be taken to reinstate the CDAs as soon as possible. The reason for their dismissal was the inability of their employers - the local authorities - to continue to pay their salaries. The most satisfactory solution would be for the central Government to take over their employment even though this may undermine the notion of community development being an essentially 'local' activity. As of January 1975, there is one CDA working in Mbere (in Gachoka Division) and she has additional responsibility for the large and time consuming non-SRDP Mwea Location.

A couple of other administrative problems should be noted:-

(a) Mbere has had a high rate of turnover of ACDOs-3 different ones in 4 years. Thus, the crucial coordinator of the Programme has been someone who, for a large part of the time, is new to the job.

(b) The role of the provincial administration has been neglected. This gave rise to a situation where chiefs and assistant chiefs were suspicious of a Programme they did not understand and therefore tended to obstruct. Improved understanding, however, now seems to exist.

As far as contact with women leaders is concerned, information ⁴ has been obtained for four different types of official - ACDO/CDO, CDAs, chiefs and assistant chiefs. This data reveals that the assistant chief is the main point of contact with the Government. Ten of the fourteen women met him daily (of course, this does not mean that they met in connection with women's group activities). The CDAs' score is second. Two women leaders reckon to meet their CDA 'almost daily', two once a week, and six at least once a month. However, four say that they see the CDA less than once in three months. Contact with ACDO/CDO and Chief is about equal in its infrequency - nine women say that, for both types of officer, they see them less often than once in 3 months. This is summarised in the following table:-

Table 6. Frequency of official contacts

Officer	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Less often than quarterly
ACDO/CDO	-	-	4	1	9
Chief	-	1	4	-	9
CDA	2	2	6	-	4
Asst. Chief	10	1	-	-	3

4. From interviews at Kangaru C.D.T.C., September 1973.